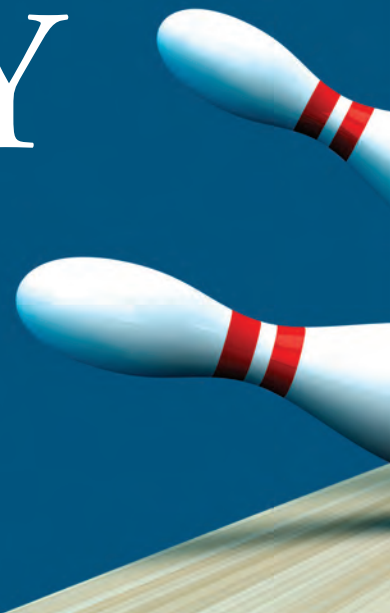


WINNING STRATEGY

Set benchmarks of early success to build momentum for the long term



By Jody Spiro

Change is a highly personal experience. Everyone participating in the effort has different reactions to change, different concerns, and different motivations for being involved. The results of change are long-term, but the change process is incremental and continuous. It is a series of destinations that lead to further destinations. The smart change leader sets benchmarks along the way so there are guideposts and pause points instead of an endless change process. “Early wins” — a term used to describe successes demonstrating concretely that achieving the change goals is feasible and will result in benefits for those involved — help accomplish this.

To bring people along, the leadership team needs to give those involved evidence at each stage that the change will succeed and that is likely to yield positive results.

That is especially true at the beginning, when skepticism about benefits and possible costs is often highest. An effective leadership team deliberately plans for small, early wins. These should be planned actions within the overall change strategy the leadership team is trying to achieve.

The leadership team should plan to achieve and document important results that are evident within the first few weeks. Of course, all involved must agree that achieving this “win” would result in something positive — that is, meeting a common definition of success — and further the overall change strategy. One benefit educators have is the immediacy of feedback from students or professional development participants. It is pretty obvious when the early win has hit its mark.

By doing so, the





leadership team will inspire confidence that the rest of the initiative can be accomplished. However, it is critically important that, once the early win is selected and announced, the promised results are achieved by the stated deadline. To do anything less would risk deflating confidence in the initiative’s feasibility, which is the opposite of what the leadership team is trying to do.

HOW IT WORKS

Let’s say that the school’s goal is to improve student achievement or close the achievement gap. It is a recipe for failure to proclaim that goal in September and say that the “win” will be whether test results in June show that success. Yet that is often what happens.

The concept of early wins requires setting the objective of improving student achievement — such as in mathematics as measured by results on the June test increasing a specified amount. However, it is critical to plan backward from that June test. What steps can be taken along the way to ensure that the desired results will be

accomplished by June? What can be done within the first two to three weeks to produce something tangible and symbolic that all will agree is an important step in the right direction? This will give the confidence and momentum to go forward and also give the change leader something important on which to build.

This process involves several steps:

1. Identify the problem and define the objectives to address it.
2. Design the overall strategy to achieve the objectives.
3. Develop actions (activities) under the strategy.
4. Plan, implement, and publicize the early win.

OBJECTIVES, STRATEGY, AND ACTIONS

In the example cited above, the problem is that the school is underperforming in mathematics. The objective is to improve student achievement in mathematics as measured by this year’s June test scores compared with those of last June. The objective should be as specific as possible, stating

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which grade and the expected amount of increase in scores.

Numerous overall strategies can guide activity development. Change leaders might use the high-leverage leadership strategy of developing a professional learning community for school personnel (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010; Knapp, Copeland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010). With this strategy, participants can try new content and pedagogies to learn together how to improve mathematics instruction for students, which should lead to improved mathematics test scores.

There are several actions the leadership team might consider to promote professional learning. For example:

1. Find out which values are most prevalent among school personnel and therefore will be useful in planning further action steps for professional development.
2. Introduce data-based planning committees, where teams use data to identify the areas of greatest concern. Based on the results, develop action plans to address those areas.
3. Promote classroom visitations among teachers so they can learn from each other's mathematics lessons.
4. Use technology to differentiate instruction in mathematics.

Once the leadership team has determined what is to be accomplished and how, the next critical step is to determine the best way to start or the early win, which needs to have the following characteristics.

ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF EARLY WINS

Regardless which win the leadership team chooses, it must be:

- Tangible and observable;
- Achievable;
- Perceived by most people as having more benefits than costs;
- Nonthreatening to those who oppose the strategy;
- Symbolic of a desired shared value;
- Publicized and celebrated; and
- Used to build momentum.

Tangible and observable

The early win must be obvious to see; a real result that can be put on paper or made real in ways that everyone can observe. Using data is important. The leadership team must define specifically what the result will be (a product or a measurable change from x to y). This will be the proof the leadership team will present at the deadline to demonstrate that the win has been accomplished.

Achievable

Above all, the leadership team must be absolutely certain it can accomplish the win. Failure to do so will do great damage to the cause. Failure will prove that this change is not feasible, so there is quite a lot riding on accomplishing the win by the established deadline.

Because those who support the strategy are already on board, the audience for the early win is those who might oppose the change or stand to lose something important to them as a result of the change. The leadership team will know who these groups are from the stakeholder analysis and the resistance analysis.

Perceived by most people as having more benefits than costs

The early win should further these gains so that participants can see how it will benefit them. In general, an education or training program is usually perceived as a benefit as long as it matches the readiness of participants. This means the program gives them skills or knowledge that they perceive they need and is not being imposed on those who believe they already have the skills or don't need them.

Nonthreatening to those who oppose the strategy

Because those who support the strategy are already on board, the audience for the early win is those who might oppose the change or stand to lose something important to them as a result of the change. The leadership team will know who these groups are from the stakeholder analysis and the resistance analysis.

This will enable the leadership team to develop and implement an early win that will bring those who are resistant on board or at least signal to them that they should not be threatened by the change strategy. Another strategy is to develop an early win in an area that is the least threat to anyone.

Symbolic of a desired shared value

The early win is only of use if — after all these other considerations — it is perceived as important within the context of the organizational culture. It must be a symbol that says that important organizational values are being furthered by this win and therefore by the larger change strategy.

Publicized and celebrated

Once the early win is accomplished, the leadership team makes sure everyone knows about it, or it will be of limited use for the change strategy. The leadership team can arrange a celebration of this destination before taking on the next, larger activity.

Used to build momentum

As important as it is to have an early win, this technique only works once or twice. After the leadership team has established the momentum that an early win provides, it needs to

EARLY WIN WONDER TOOL

Overall change strategy: _____

Early win action under consideration: _____

DOES THE PROPOSED ACTION MEET ALL ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE EARLY WIN?	EVIDENCE (HOW?)
Importance: Accomplishing this will meet the common understanding of what constitutes success.	
Importance: It is not merely nice to do, but necessary to move the work forward; the action is considered an urgent priority by most.	
Tangible and observable: There is a transparent, observable outcome, either a specific work product or improvement measured by data.	
Achievable: You are certain the change can be accomplished within the stated time frame.	
Perceived as having more benefits than costs to most people: Individuals who will be implementing the action perceive benefits to achieving this early win — even if those benefits are not those that the leader articulates.	
Helps those affected deal with loss: The action creates a positive substitute for what people perceive might be lost through the change strategy.	
Nonthreatening to opposing groups: Groups that oppose the change would perceive benefits if this objective were accomplished.	
An area of relatively less interest: The change is in an area that excites relatively fewer passions by important stakeholder groups.	
Symbolic of shared values: The program is an important symbol in the culture.	
Plans to publicize: There are mechanisms to communicate the win broadly at the beginning and again at the deadline.	

Source: Spiro, 2011, pp. 95-96.

EXAMPLE OF A COMPLETED EARLY WIN WONDER TOOL

Overall change strategy: Develop a professional learning community to improve mathematics instruction.

Early win action under consideration: Perform the values clarification exercise at the next faculty conference.

DOES THE PROPOSED ACTION MEET ALL ESSENTIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE EARLY WIN?	EVIDENCE (HOW?)
Importance: Accomplishing this will meet the common understanding of what constitutes success.	We would consider it a success to get to know each other better. It would also be a plus to have an experience where we could learn more about ourselves.
Importance: It is not merely nice to do, but necessary to move the work forward; the action is considered an urgent priority by most.	We need to “walk the talk” about being a learning organization; that starts with knowing what we really value.
Tangible and observable: There is a transparent, observable outcome, either a specific work product or improvement measured by data.	There will be a spreadsheet of data with the frequency with which each value was cited as important by our school.
Achievable: You are certain the change can be accomplished within the stated time frame.	This is a proven exercise that can be done in an hour. Results can be tabulated and distributed within a day.
Perceived as having more benefits than costs to most people: Individuals who will be implementing the action perceive benefits to achieving this early win — even if those benefits are not those that the leader articulates.	There is something of value here for everyone since they will be reflecting on their own values.
Helps those affected deal with loss: The action creates a positive substitute for what people perceive might be lost through the change strategy.	Doing this exercise demonstrates to everyone that whatever comes next will not upset the most important values.
Nonthreatening to opposing groups: Groups that oppose the change would perceive benefits if this objective were accomplished.	Everyone appreciates being asked about his or her values and having his or her voice be heard.
An area of relatively less interest: The change is in an area that excites relatively fewer passions by important stakeholder groups.	No group objects to finding out more about the values of its members. This information is useful to all as a basis for planning further steps.
Symbolic of shared values: The program is an important symbol in the culture.	We are finding out about our shared values, and doing this exercise shows how important it is to further those in our school.
Plans to publicize: There are mechanisms to communicate the win broadly at the beginning and again at the deadline.	We will publicize the compiled results the next day to the school community and plan our next actions for professional learning on the basis of furthering our shared values.

Source: Spiro, 2011, pp. 95-96.

capitalize on that momentum, using the newfound credibility to develop the next, larger change strategy and reach for the larger win.

POTENTIAL EARLY WINS

The three possible actions listed here could have early wins associated with each as a first step. It is unlikely that everyone will see the merit in any one strategy, so starting small and tangibly is the way to go. For example:

1. To get data on school values, the leadership team might conduct a values clarification exercise at the next faculty conference. Such an exercise would have the double benefit of assisting each participant to reflect on what is meaningful to him or her as well as synthesizing the results to gain a perspective on values schoolwide.
2. To promote data-based planning committees, the leadership team might start with the grade that is most ready and have those teachers share their results with the rest of the school community within a specified period of time.
3. To promote classroom visitations among teachers, the leadership team might start with one or two pairs of teachers who are interested and have them report to the larger school community on what they learn in those visits.

The Early Win Wonder tool on p. 14 is devised to help leadership teams develop early wins and decide which to choose. Each early win can be subjected to the analysis of the tool. A completed version of the tool appears on p. 15. Self-reflection questions at right prepare the leader to use the tool.

USING THE TOOL

In using the Early Win Wonder tool to analyze these three potential early wins, the values clarification exercise at the faculty meeting emerges as the best choice for this example. Until the leadership team knows which values are most highly felt by everyone, it isn't possible to guarantee the success of the other proposed early wins. The other two proposed wins are less likely to produce success because they rely on the cooperation of "ready" teachers and on the acceptance of their positive experience by less-ready folks.

The early win provides the momentum to develop professional learning based on the shared values. For this example, professional learning activities could be differentiated so that those who value learning via data could participate in data-inquiry groups and those who value collaborative learning could participate in classroom visitation.

It doesn't take long to achieve early wins, allowing the leadership team to move quickly toward other, larger actions to achieve its objective.

LEADER'S SELF-REFLECTION QUESTIONS FOR THE EARLY WIN WONDER TOOL

- Am I willing to put my credibility on the line to guarantee the success of this action?
- Am I willing to postpone implementing the large action I really want to take until after the small, early win is successful?
- Will I be able to implement an early win that is important to those affected, but seems relatively unimportant to me? Am I aware of what people perceive they are losing and building that into the proposed small, early win?
- Am I 100% certain this small, early win can be accomplished in the timeframe?
- Am I prepared with a plan to build on the momentum of the early success? Am I clear where we go from here and what action comes next?



REFERENCES

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